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CHAPTER VI

THE LINEAGE FRAMEWORK OF VILLAGES

Matrilineal Kinship

TO outsiders a village appears to be an undifferentiated whole and in interaction with other villages it acts as such. But within the village, social actions are determined by membership of kinship groups whose genealogical relationships to each other differ from one village to another. The village headman who represents the unity of the village is usually a kinsman of all the villagers, but the links to him are different and diverse. Yet he commands the leadership of the village, not so much by his kinship to the villagers, for a villager may have other mother's brothers and fathers in the village, but by his position in a political structure, where he represents the village to outsiders and to external authority.

Yao social groups are organized on a principle of matrilineal descent but we shall see that, although this is the main principle, it is modified by the general political mould into which villages are forced. We have already seen that, at least in the lines of important headmen, clan-names are inherited from the mother.[1] This is the simplest and most direct way in which matrilineal descent affects social relationships. The principle of matrilineal descent is far more important in organizing the smallest group which acts corporately within the village—the matrilineage.

A significant feature of Yao social structure is that the village organization tends to cut across lineages. In the process of segmentation of matrilineages, which I shall discuss in detail later, new villages are formed. When this happens the dissident kin usually set up their homesteads a good distance from the original or parent village. The links between different sections of the same matrilineage, therefore, tend to become lost, and the new village, conscious of its own identity and unity, gradually loses its links with the parent village. The general structural relationship between the villages as wholes, and their headmen as their representatives, is fixed at the time when the division takes place, and this is remembered. But the actual genealogical

[1] See Chap. III, p. 71.

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Other Types of Village Structure

621 571 Linked groups in most villages are connected by patrilateral ties, but other kinsmen, or even unrelated persons, are also found in villages. I have been describing essentially the organization of groups. Some kinsmen do in fact come to live in villages because of personal links to the headman or some other villager. If a man or woman does this, he or she usually has a single hut which is placed close to his or her kinsman. If the person lives in the village long enough a related group may grow up around him or her, and when the children reach adulthood this group will become internally organized and corporate in its dealings with the other groups in the village. But this seldom happens, because the ties to the resident kinsman are usually too weak to hold the children, or the causes which drove the founder of the new group out of his or her original village have disappeared. Children may leave a village with their mother because she was accused of being a sorceress, and go to live in the village where her brother is married. When she dies, or the incident is forgotten, they may go back to their matrilineal village. For example, Bt. Mkwinda of Cikoja village ran away with her husband after her child was supposed to have been bewitched by her mother. But her children, as they grew up, came back to marry in the village of origin, or at least to contract marriages near it. In Chiwalo's, Nyambi's and Kawinga's areas, where I have recorded most genealogies of villages, I found few people who were neither matrilineal- nor patrilaterally-linked relatives. In Malemia area, which is nearer Zomba, the situation was somewhat different. The dominant matrilineage- and patrilaterally-linked groups of the typical Yao village were still quite easily discernible. But there were other related and unrelated groups and huts in the villages. An example of this is Citenjele village,[1] on the north boundary of Malemia's area. There the main village contained the following huts:

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Dominant matrilineage	22
Groups linked through present headman	5
Hut linked through present headman's brother	1
Groups linked through previous headman	5
Groups linked through previous headman's brother	4
	37 huts

[1] See also 'An Outline of the Social Structure of Malemia Area', 36-40.

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About 250 yards to the north-west is a single hut belonging to the sister of the husband of one of the present headman's daughters. In the middle of the group on the road is a single hut of a woman who has no connections in the village at all. Her husband works in a mission garden about a mile away. About 100 yards from the north-east edge of the main block is a group of 4 huts which are unrelated to Citenjele, but which had joined him about 25 years ago before he had moved into Malemia area. About 250 yards farther to the north-east there are 2 huts owned by the daughters of the sister of the wife of a man who had married one of the female members of the dominant matrilineage. Due east about half a mile away, there is a group of 6 huts which are owned by Yao. These are unrelated groups and are under Citenjele as Administrative Village Headman, but they are for all intents and purposes separate villages.

There are other types of villages. For example, in Nanwera area I found a village composed of a number of unrelated sections. The huts of each could quite easily be distinguished from those of other sections though they were built very close to each other in some parts of the village. Each section was built up on exactly the same pattern as other Yao villages—that is, there was a dominant matrilineage and sometimes some patrilaterally-linked huts. Each section had its own leader who concerned himself with its internal affairs. He, nevertheless, recognized the authority in general of a village headman, who lived in one of the sections of the village. He was the Administrative Headman for the village and he was the first to come into the area. All the other sections had had to ask him for land when they had moved into the area. His authority was confined to his duties as Administrative Headman though he was much respected and the sections called him in regularly as an arbitrator in their affairs. But if the chief called all village headmen to the court, the leaders of the various sections went as well, as then he was not in fact their representative to outside authority in all situations. The relationships between the various sections, therefore, were very much like those between village headmen in Kawinga's area. The only difference seemed to be the amount of physical concentration of the huts.

I tried to find out why these sections lived so close to one another. My informants told me that there were many men away at labour centres and it was necessary to build the huts

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close together so that the few men left in the village could protect the village against man-eating lions. This is certainly an area where man-eating lions are common and kill people every year. It is true also that man-eating lions have ceased their depredations in Kwings and Nyambi areas. But I also found a similar type of village in Malemia area.[1] Here the explanation was that the villages had been made to live together by the Administration under the 1912 Ordinance. But the Ordinance was applied to the whole district, yet there are not many of these villages.

The relationships between the section leaders and the village headman are exactly the same as those between independent headmen farther south. The difference in the villages is the degree of physical concentration of the huts; which brings up for review the concept of 'the village'. I have defined the village as a discrete cluster of huts occupied by a group of kinsmen[2] and hinted that the huts were not always clearly separated from neighbouring huts. In fact the Yao word for village, *muzi*, may be applied to social groups of different orders. I have already mentioned that different sections of a village may be scattered in discrete groups. The term *kamuzi* (diminutive) or even *muzi* may be applied to any of these clusters of huts in a situation where the larger kinship section is not involved. A man may tell his friend that he has bought some maize at Meni's village. He means that he bought the maize at the group of huts under Meni in Majaja village. In a court case, however, he would say that he had married a woman in Majaja village even though he were referring to the daughter of Meni.

The expanded village—i.e. the groups of kinsmen who recognize the leadership of one man, but whose huts are relatively distantly spaced in discrete clusters—may give a stamp to the social organization in a small area of, say, a square mile or two. The dominant matrilineage of the senior headman and his patrilaterally-linked groups may all live in this area in physically separate groups, but their kinship is still dominant and they are for ritual purposes still 'of one fire'. In time any of these groups may move off and be replaced by complete strangers. The senior headman still retains his position of authority over the

[1] Ngalango village. It is described in 'An Outline of the Social Structure of Malemia Area', 33-6.

[2] Chap. I, p. 2, and Chap. V, p. 110 f.

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strangers. Meantime, the seceding group moves into some other village area at a distant place, where they are strangers themselves. The result is that kinship soon ceases to be the organizing principle in local areas, and the principle of primacy takes its place. Hence, primary[1] kinship provides the principle on which the relationships among village headmen, and therefore villages, may be organized in a local area, for only a relatively short time. Before long, for a variety of reasons, the smaller villages move away and their sites are taken by others.

Primary matrilineal kinship on the other hand retains its significance as the means whereby relationships are organized within villages. In other words, outside the lineages of the ruling families it is very difficult to record a genealogy which does more than link the component parts of a village. Beyond this genealogies are socially insignificant. Therefore, since villages are continually breaking up, genealogies are usually shallow. Once a group has broken away to found a new village, its exact genealogical link with the parent village tends to be forgotten and replaced by a formalized link of perpetual kinship between the two village headmen.

Yao society, therefore, is not 'organic' in the way that Fortes describes Tallensi society: it is not 'governed by the same principles at all levels and in every sector of the social structure'.[2] Instead different principles of organization apply at different levels of Yao society. Thus the shallow lineages that form the cores of villages are internally segmented. Villages are composed of matrilineages linked to each other usually through patrilateral ties, ties which are initially primary but become perpetual. Chiefdoms, on the other hand, may be seen as organizations of villages ranked in relation to each other and to the chief in terms of their perpetual kinship links, their antecedents, and their strength of following.

The same groups of matrilineal kinsmen may interact in three different fields of social relationships. Firstly, they may form a segment within a matrilineage. Secondly, they may form a group in a village linked initially by a primary and later by a perpetual patrilateral tie to the headman. Thirdly, if they

[1] I.e. kinship that can actually be traced as against 'putative' or 'perpetual' kinship.

[2] Fortes, *The Web of Kinship*, 241.

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621 should break away to found a new village they may become a
571 Newcomer and relatively junior hamlet in political relationships
with other villages in a local area of a chiefdom.
613 The group of kinsmen in each situation exhibits different degrees of corporate identity. As part of a lineage the identity of the group, except in unusual circumstances, is merged in the identity of the lineage. As part of a village the identity of the group appears clearly enough in intra-village affairs, but is merged in the identity of the village otherwise. It is only when the group can set up as a village of its own that its identity is finally established, that is, when the group becomes fully autonomous.

The identity of a group of matrilineal kinsmen therefore varies with the extent to which matrilineal ties with other kinsmen are attenuated. They can emphasize their independence of their kinsmen by playing down the link between them. A linked lineage in a village emphasizes its *patrilateral* link with the dominant lineage and so maintains its identity within its village of residence. The members do not consider themselves a part of a matrilineage which is dominant in some other village. By the same process a newly-founded hamlet does not emphasize its detailed and intimate links with its parent village, but tends to subsume these into a formal, perpetual relationship between the respective village headmen.

In Yao society, therefore, we may distinguish three orders or levels of social grouping:

1. The matrilineage which consists of ranked lineage segments.
2. The village which consists of ranked matrilineages.
3. The chiefdom which consists of ranked villages.

It is only at the most fundamental of these levels, i.e. within the matrilineage, that matrilineal descent provides a principle for organizing group relations. At the next level, i.e. within the village, matrilineal kinship gives way to other types of primary kinship between key personalities in the structure. At the third level, i.e. within the chiefdom, kinship appears only in the form of the highly formalized 'perpetual' kinship—the actual links may well have been forgotten long ago. The same kinship term may be applied between personalities at all three levels of organization, but the content of the term changes according to the field of interaction.